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ABSTRACT

A teacher, after learning about emergent writing in an inservice teacher education course and noticing various levels of writing in her 16 kindergarten and first-grade children, decided to involve the parents of her students in a similar learning process. A 4-week project involving dialogue journals ensued. Written questioning techniques developed as a means of encouraging parental communication with students. Active participation by parents had positive effects in modeling, parent-teacher-student communications, parental appreciation of student writings, and increased progress in student writings. (Contains nine references and five figures presenting teacher letters to parents, students' writing, and parents' responses.) (RS)

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Dialogue journals: A method of involving and educating parents in the writing development of their child

by

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June 20, 1994

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When I began teaching first grade, I was not prepared to teach children to write. Because I felt inadequate, I avoided writing until most of the children were beginning to be independent readers and had formal spelling instruction for some time. I assumed children would have to be able to read before they could write. Even as a parent, I had observed my own children scribbling on paper, making marks that looked like writing, with more amusement than anything else. I regarded my childrens' efforts at early writing as simply play and gave it very little thought.

As I became a more experienced teacher, I gained more confidence in myself and the children I taught. I expected the children to write more and was pleasantly surprised when they did. But I still believed they needed to know all the sounds of the alphabet and some basic sight words before they could "really" write.

As I continued my own education, I took a class called "Young Children and Literacy", University of Alaska, Juneau. I was introduced to the world of the emergent reader and writer by the instructor Marjorie Fields. By then I was teaching kindergarteners as well as first graders, and as I began asking them to read me pages from their journals, I was amazed that five year olds were able to "read" what they had written even if I could not. For example, after the experience of making playdough, several kindergarteners wrote, "I L P D", and because I asked them to read what they had written, they did, "I like playdough!"

As I encouraged the kindergarteners to write more and to "write it your way", they continued to grow and many quickly moved from one level of emergent writing to other higher levels. Words which were earlier represented by a letter became more complex, even containing vowels as the children moved into the realm of invented spelling. At times several forms might be combined or a child might go back to an earlier form, but always a story or thought was represented, there for the asking.

"Children go back and forth across the forms of writing, but teachers can begin to understand how the forms function developmentally for given children by listening while they compose and by asking them to read from their writing (Sulzby, Barnhart &Hieshima, in press; Strickland & Morrow, 1989)

This was so exciting to me that I wanted to share it with anyone that would listen. I showed examples to other teachers and discussed my findings with them, but most of all I wanted the parents to understand and participate in this stage of their child's development. I had missed this stage with my own children and now regretted it. With parent-teacher conferences held only twice a year, I had to find another way to involve the parents of my students. Noting that parental involvement in planning of home-school programs is often lacking and is an essential ingredient in the success of such programs, (Rasinski, 1989) I sent a survey home with the children.

The survey consisted of five questions, the first four to be answered by circling "Often, Sometimes, or Not Often". The questions were:

1. I read for personal enjoyment.
2. I read stories to my child.
3. I do writing activities with my child (letters, lists, stories, etc.)
4. I am concerned that my child watches too much television.
5. I would like to be involved in planning a program to increase my child's home reading and writing time. (This could be done over the phone.)

(The last question was to be answered by circling, "Yes, Maybe, No") Comments were also invited at the bottom of the page.

There were several reasons behind the survey. I wanted to see if parents were doing writing activities at home with their children. I knew many of the children were reading to their parents, but I was interested in how many were reading to their child. I also hoped that parents would show an interest in planning a home-school program. The survey could also serve as a basis for comparison after implementing a program.

Eighteen surveys were sent home and thirteen were completed and returned. Four parents said they often read stories to their child, nine did sometimes, and none circled "Not Often". Only one parent circled "Often" in response to writing activities. Seven said they sometimes did writing activities and five said "Not Often". Clearly, more emphasis was placed on reading in the home than on writing.

Five parents indicated a positive "Yes", they would like to be involved in the planning of a home-school reading and writing program. There were five "Maybe's" and three "No's"

Parents were contacted by phone and because many indicated they liked the journals and journal activities their children were doing in school, the home-school journal project began. My purpose in implementing this program would be to involve parents in the literary development of their children, most specifically writing. Rasinski and Fredericks, (1991) stress the importance in offering children many opportunities to write at home. A dialogue journal is just one of many ways parents can encourage writing (Rasinski & Fredericks, 1991)

Because a dialogue journal involves communication between people, it seemed to be an excellent tool for this purpose. Fields & Spangler (1995, in draft) suggest a weekly home-school journal, with students writing each Friday about a significant thing that happened in school. This journal should be sent home with the expectation that parents will respond and return the journal. "This real communication allows parents a personal view of what is going on at school. The home-school journal also provides parents with a good weekly look at writing development over the school year" (p. 157).

There are many articles in educational journals and monthly magazines promoting the idea of parents reading to their children. For years, schools have also promoted the many benefits of parents reading to their children.

"Much less has been done to devise effective plans and approaches for involving parents as their children become writers (Reutzel & Fawson, 1990). Since reading and writing are so closely tied, it would seem that parental involvement in the writing process would also be very beneficial. Boss and Powell, (1991), developed a program in a small Nebraska School District promoting active parent participation in the literary development of students. The first year focused on encouraging parental reading to children, and the second year added writing activities. Attitude measures indicated a positive effect for the participants involved.

In a pamphlet prepared for the National Endowment for the Arts, "From Words to Stories" (1993), parents are encouraged to read aloud to their children, beginning when they are very little, to build a firm foundation for future writing. Making writing fun by allowing children to write without fear of criticism is stressed to parents, along with many ideas for fun writing projects.

With these and other ideas in mind, I sent a letter home, stapled to the front of each student's writing journal (see Figure 1). Since the kids had been splashing about in the mud and water of a typical Alaskan Spring break-up, I suggested "Break-up" as a general topic. The journals were to be returned the following Tuesday.

The results were as varied as the sixteen students who returned their journals to school.

Figure 1

April 7, 1994

Dear Parents:

For the next month, I'd like to use your child's journal as a means of communication between home and school and to involve you with your child's writing progress. I'm really looking forward to this project and hope we all enjoy it and learn from writing to each other.

Please spend some time looking over your child's journal with him/her. Most kindergarten students are drawing pictures and beginning to write a few letters which symbolize words for them. For instance, ILPD, means "I like playdough." If you ask your child to tell you what he/she is writing, they will! Encourage them to write at the level they're at without insisting that words are spelled correctly. Kids learn a lot from invented spelling. With lots of reading and writing practice, spelling will become standard.

The first grade students are rapidly becoming independent writers. Like anything, some are more confident than others. Their writing is an interesting mixture of invented and standard spelling.

For the first writing "assignment", I am going to suggest the topic of "break-up", and let you take it from there. Your child might like to write anything from a word to a sentence to a story. He/she might enjoy drawing a picture and dictating a story to you. I'd like to hear your comments after the project is completed. Please remember that the product is not as important as the process here. We just need to dive in and get started!

Please return the journals by Tuesday. Thanks so much for your help.

Mrs Hanson

Some had drawn pictures with no story line, some had written stories that they eagerly read to when I asked them about their journal entry. Andrew, a young kindergartener had written,

"Sno mlt
MuDCumup
mSECETO."

He read to me, " The snow melts and mud comes up. Then the mosquitoes come out and I'm going to stay inside all summer!" He carefully pointed to the words he had written, and grinned at me as he finished his story with the declaration that he wasn't going to go outside all summer!

Because I hoped to encourage Andrew's parents to write back to Andrew in his journal, I added my comments," Dear Andrew, I don't like mosquitos either. Will your mom and dad let you stay inside all summer?"

Andrew's journal entry was similar to many of the students. Evidently their parents had taken the letter and journal as a homework assignment for the student to do all the writing. The students wrote wonderful stories, and one story was even published in the local newspaper, but the dialogue that I had hoped to establish wasn't there. Only one parent had written any comments to their child. I decided my directions were vague and decided to try a more direct approach the following week.

The students had rediscovered the painting center and had been creating large tempra paintings. These paintings and the typical week's worth of papers went home on Friday with their journals.

I asked my students to write a note to their parents. The first graders wrote, "Dear Mom and Dad, I hope you like my papers. Which paper do you like the best? Please write me a note about it?" The kindergarteners copied, "Do you like my picture?" A short letter accompanied these requests (see Figure 2).

This idea of asking the parents a specific question, came from a fellow first grade teacher, Dona Calcote, from Glennallen. She had been using home-school journals all year. Her students, with their sixth grade writing buddies, wrote about happenings in school or in their lives, ending on each Friday with a question to their parents. Dona felt the parents that had kept up with the journals had a priceless record of their child's progress in first grade. Her biggest problem was getting the journals back, one which as each week went by became a bigger problem for me as well.

The parents responded dramatically to the written requests of their children. Not only did they answer their child, many wrote beautiful compliments and added questions of their own. As I paged through the journals (some students didn't look for the next page, but for any blank page), I began to see that the parents were starting to write comments about other pictures and journal entries as well.

Jesse's mom wrote a note to him, " I hope you have a good day and that you are feeling good again. See you at the bus stop."

Figure 2

April 14, 1994

Dear Parents,

For our journal activity this week, your child is writing a little note to you. It may be about one of the papers included in the blue folder or some other question. The idea is show how writing is actually communication between people. The kids are writing to you and you will be writing back to them in their journals (please). This idea can be extended by writing to your child and having your child answer you in writing, instead of talking for a short time. This can be lots of fun and it's really quiet!

If you have other comments or ideas for writing activities, please include them too.

Thanks for your help.

Mrs. Hanson

She added a note to me, "Jesse has been sick to his stomach. He says he is feeling better today, but if he wants to go home, please call me." The journals were becoming what I had envisioned, a means of communication between child, parent, and teacher.

The next letter that went home with the journals focused on list making (see Figure 3). Unfortunately, the journals that were missplaced the first week hadn't returned and more were missing each week. As before, I sent the letter home with several blank sheets of paper for those students with no journal. Seven journals and two on the blank sheets of paper were returned. Some students wrote impressive lists of chores, some made grocery lists, and one made a wish list of toys, but my favorite list was Teresa's (see Figure 4). Teresa wrote to her mother, "CumscecePles? (Can you make some cookies, please?)

Her mother answered, "Yes Teresa, we will make cookies today."
On the following page, Teresa listed the ingredients to make chocolate chip cookies, as follows:

CACHHCP CECEZ (Chocolate Chip Cookies)

BeDR (Butter)
SGR (Sugar)
VeLA (Vanila)
AGZ (Eggs)
FLAR (Flour)
BAGSD (Baking Soda)
SALT

WANS (Walnuts
RAZNA (Raisins)
CACHCPS (Chocolate chips)

Figure 3

April 21, 1994

Dear Parents:

What great comments you made to your kids last week! Isn't it nice to receive a written compliment? It can be read and re-read as many of yours have been.

This week we're going to focus on list writing. Maybe some of you write lists of things to do or lists of groceries to buy. Please help your child write (or dictate to you) a list. If it's a grocery list, it would be fun to go shopping together, with the kids crossing off items as they put them in the cart. Cereal boxes are usually one of the first things kids can read!

If it's a list of chores to do, it's always satisfying to cross off the jobs as they're done. When you're finished with either list, please write a description of what you and your child did. Like last week, you could write to each other, saying what you liked or didn't like about the activity. Or you might want to take a different approach.

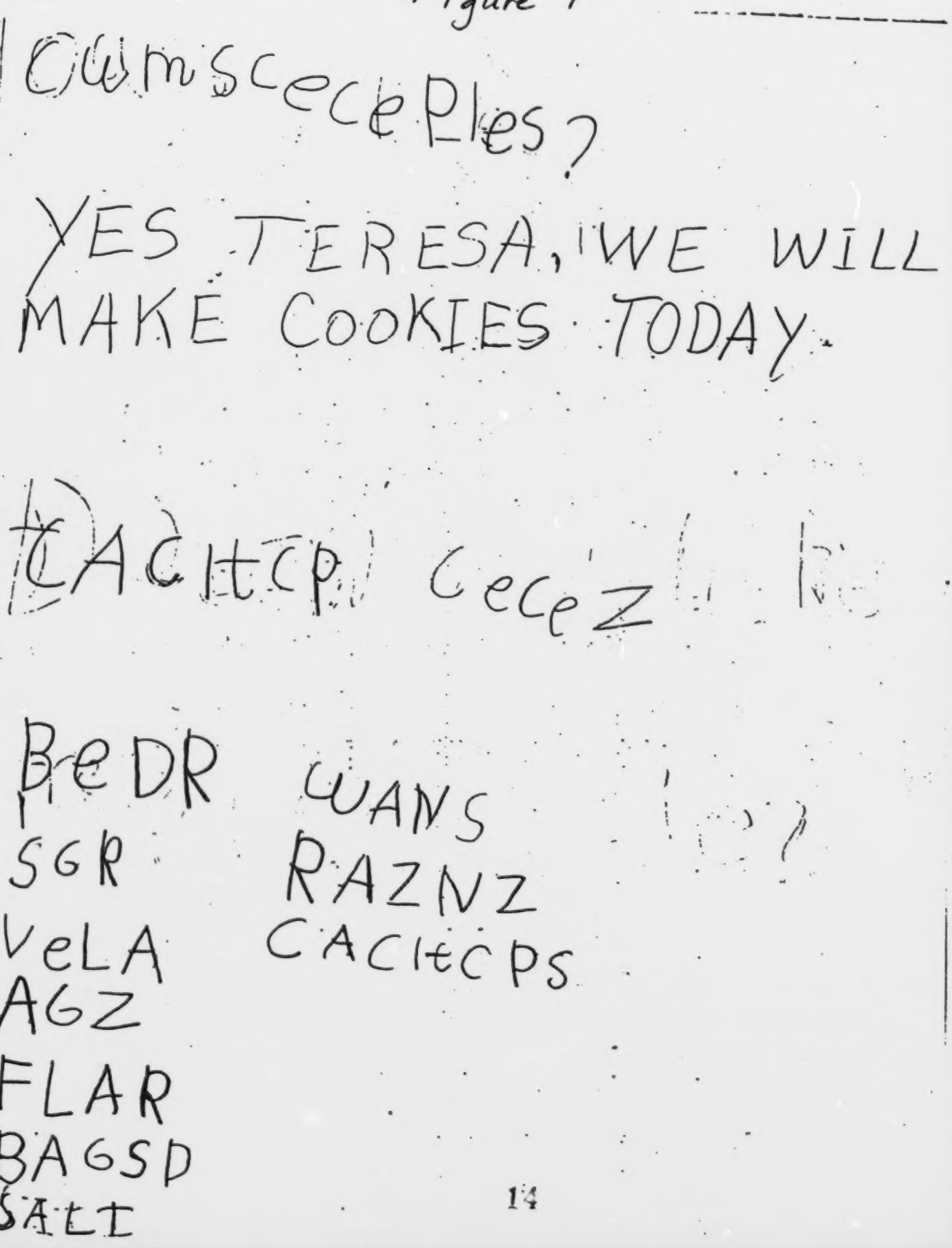
Lists are certainly a good use for writing. I'm sure some of your lists of things to do are as long as mine about now. Spring is great for list making!

Thanks and happy list making!

Mrs. Hanson

P.S. Please return the journals by Tuesday.

Figure 4



Teresa brought me two chocolate chip cookies the following Monday, which were delicious! As she proudly read the list of ingredients for the class, Michael grabbed a piece of paper and said, "Let me write that recipe down!" Writing was producing writing, which was producing writing!

Analysis

The outcome of this project was difficult to measure. Because I was trying to involve parents in their child's writing development, I needed to find out from them if they had enjoyed and learned from the journal activities. The parents I was most interested in talking with were the parents that had indicated they did not often do writing activities with their children. As I talked with these parents, their enthusiasm was extremely encouraging. One parent said that an older brother had began doing more writing after seeing the interest his parents paid to his sister's journal stories. The parents felt the journals were keepsakes to look back at in years to come. They were impressed with the growth their children had made during the project. All indicated they thought it was a good project and would like to extend the time next year, beginning in September.

On my part, I could hardly wait for the students to bring back their journals. Each entry was a unique expression of the student's thoughts. Because the "assignments" were intentionally general, few entries were alike.

Journal entries by parents provided special information about their relationship with their child. Interestingly enough, parents seemed to respond with about the same amount of writing as their child did. Jade, a very prolific first grade writer typically wrote at least one page per entry. When responding to which papers were her favorites, her mother answered with a carefully drawn illustration of their kitchen and a page long letter. The letter detailed which papers she especially liked and why. She then asked her daughter which paper she liked best and why. She also asked her daughter about her favorite hobbies, and ended with, "Please write back!"

The daughter did write back (see Figure 5).

"Dear mom

Thank you for the note. my faverite paper is the flower one. But my faverite activetie is painting. I bet you like to paint? I like flowers? do you?"

It doesn't seem surprising that this child excels in writing. Her mother and father were both excited about the journal entries and stories Jade was writing. Their praise even encouraged an older sibling to begin writing at home, an activity he had previously avoided. The positive effect of parental attention is noted by Otto and Sulzby (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). Academically able preschoolers were writing only skimpy stories while the teacher was keeping the stories for research purposes and not displaying them in the classroom.

Figure 5

Dear mom
Thank you for
the note. my faverite
paper is the flower
one. But my
faverite active is
painting. I bet you
like to paint?
I like flowers? do you?

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When the teacher began sending their stories home to share with parents, they began writing long, multimedia compositions.

In reading the journal entries above, it is clear that Jade's mother was doing a beautiful job of modeling as well praising specific works. Her technique of questioning may have been modeled after her daughter's question, but Jade continued writing an additional entry with more questions of her own. We learn from each other and this example reinforced my earlier beliefs in the importance of asking questions if a dialogue journal is to be successful.

This technique was successfully utilized by my colleague, Dona Calcote. Her first graders had sixth grade writing buddies who helped them choose topics, read entries from parents, and formulate questions for their dialogue journals. She too, felt that the questioning by the students was extremely important. In her opinion, it helped parents ~~that~~ who found writing a difficult task. A question gave them a starting place, a way to begin a response to their child.

As Dona and I discussed dialogue journals, we agreed that the most difficult problem, really the only problem, was that of the disappearing journals. At the end of my project, and of hers, about one-third of the journals had been lost or missplaced. Dona used spiral notebooks and I used student-made newsprint and construction paper journals.

We decided that a possible solution would be to have the journal entries go home as individual papers, to be collected and saved by the teacher until the end of the quarter or year. Some of the continuity would be lost if individual papers didn't return, but at least one would hope that the entire journal wouldn't disappear.

Along with this approach, one also needs to address the more serious problem of why? If the child's writing and school papers are received with indifference or the refusal to participate, as an educator, we need to consider the negative impact this has on the child. These parents are not uncaring parents as a rule, but parents that do not realize how important their positive participation is. Too, their own personal problems may be too great for them to focus on a child's homework. We need to make every attempt to involve them and educate them as to the importance of their role. Smith (1991) says, "A major challenge to family literacy efforts lies in overcoming the language and educational limitations of many at-risk families and the time constraints of almost all families. "

It is too easy to focus on the wonderful results of the two-thirds that returned their journals full of positive comments. The silent one-third whose self-esteem and reading and writing abilities are not growing as they could, need to know that they are not to blame if their parent doesn't or cannot write back to them. An older student, a community member, or other teacher could perhaps fill the role as a journal buddy for children whose journals never seem to return.

Bromley, Winters, and Schlimmer (1994) in an interactive journal writing project involving university students and at-risk eight and nine year olds, found that to be successful from all points of view. The children benefitted greatly from the modeling and responsive audience provided by the university students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found there to be many benefits from the establishing of dialogue journals. Students were able to see the power of writing as parents responded to their beginning attempts at communicating through writing. The students wrote more as their parents praised their writing, and their writing showed evidence of modeling after their parent's example, both in length and kind.

Parents became more aware of the process of an emergent writer, most specifically their own child as a writer. Their appreciation and praise was extremely important in the writing growth of their child. Parents used the dialogue journals as a tool of communication both to their child and to their child's teacher.

As the teacher, I saw what a positive impact a parent can have in a child's writing development. I felt the journals helped parents learn about their child's schoolwork and writing. Closer relationships were developed through parent-student-teacher communications.

I plan to implement dialogue journals at the beginning of next year, with special concern for those parents and students that find the dialogue journals to be a difficult or impossible task.

Abstract

This paper describes how a teacher learned about emergent writing, and as she saw her kindergarten and first grade students exhibiting the various levels of writing, decided to involve the parents in a similar learning process. A four-week project involving dialogue journals ensued. Written questioning techniques developed as a means of encouraging parental communication with students. Active participation by parents had positive affects in modeling, parent-teacher-student communications, parental appreciation of student writings, and increased progress in student writings.

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